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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000887

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SUBJECT: VISIT TO BATTICALOA: PESSIMISM PERVADES VIEWS ON
RECONSTRUCTION AND THE PEACE PROCESS

REF: A. COLOMBO 00870

[B](#). COLOMBO 00786

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: ON A MAY 9-11 TRIP TO BATTICALOA IN SRI LANKA'S TURBULENT EASTERN PROVINCE, POLOFF, INFORMATION OFFICER, A/RSO, AND POL FSN MET WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, PEACE MONITORS, AND REPRESENTATIVES FROM LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL NGOS TO ASSESS THE SITUATION ON THE GROUND AND VIEWS REGARDING TSUNAMI RECONSTRUCTION, THE SECURITY SITUATION, AND THE PEACE PROCESS. OVERALL THE MOOD ON ALL FRONTS WAS GRIM, A FEELING EXACERBATED BY THE MAY 9 KILLING OF A TAMIL CIVILIAN BY THE SECURITY FORCES AND THE SUBSEQUENT HARTAL (STRIKE) THAT SHUT DOWN THE CITY (REF A). LIKE MOST OF THE ISLAND'S EAST COAST, BATTICALOA SUFFERED HEAVY TSUNAMI DAMAGE, AND THERE WERE FEW SIGNS THAT RECONSTRUCTION HAD BEGUN. IN CONVERSATIONS WITH POLOFF, REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE VARIOUS NGOS COMPLAINED THAT AFTER A PROMISING INITIAL HUMANITARIAN EFFORT IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE TSUNAMI, PROGRESS APPEARED TO BE SLOWING. ON THE SECURITY SITUATION, INTERLOCUTORS REPORTED THAT MORE CHECKPOINTS WERE GOING UP AND THAT LOCAL MILITARY INSTALLATIONS WERE EXPANDING AND REINFORCING THEIR DEFENSES. ALTHOUGH NONE OF THE INTERLOCUTORS BELIEVED WAR WAS IMMINENT, THE GENERAL CONSENSUS WAS THAT THE SITUATION ON BOTH THE HUMANITARIAN AND SECURITY FRONTS WAS HEADED IN THE WRONG DIRECTION. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (C) POLOFF AND POL FSN TRAVELED TO BATTICALOA FROM MAY 9 TO 11 TO GAUGE THE AREA'S HUMANITARIAN AND SECURITY SITUATION, ESPECIALLY FOLLOWING WEEKS OF NEGATIVE PRESS REPORTING ESCALATING VIOLENCE IN THE REGION AND POOR PROGRESS ON TSUNAMI RECONSTRUCTION. UNFORTUNATELY, BATTICALOA'S REPUTATION AS ONE OF SRI LANKA'S MOST VOLATILE CITIES HIT HOME ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE VISIT WHEN A PROTEST AGAINST A NEW LOCAL SECURITY CHECKPOINT GREW VIOLENT. SECURITY FORCES OPENED FIRE ON THE CROWD, KILLING ONE ELDERLY CIVILIAN AND WOUNDING DOZENS MORE (REF A). THE RESULTING HARTAL (STRIKE)--ONE OF THE MOST STRICTLY ENFORCED AND WIDELY HONORED IN THE REGION IN A LONG TIME, ACCORDING TO LOCALS--SHUT DOWN THE CITY THE NEXT DAY AND RESTRICTED OFFICIALS FROM BOTH THE EMBASSY AND ALL INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO THEIR HOTELS.

[1](#)3. (C) BEFORE THE HARTAL, HOWEVER, POLOFF AND POL FSN WERE ABLE TO VISIT THE COASTAL AREAS AROUND BATTICALOA TO ASSESS THE LEVEL OF DAMAGE AND PACE OF RECONSTRUCTION AFTER THE TSUNAMI. THERE WERE FEW, IF ANY, NOTICEABLE SIGNS OF

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RECONSTRUCTION, AND MOST VICTIMS WERE STILL LIVING IN TENTS NEXT TO THE REMAINS OF THEIR PROPERTY. OVERALL, THE MOOD IN BATTICALOA ITSELF WAS TENSE, AND ON THE DRIVE OUT OF THE CITY ON MAY 11 POLOFF SAW THE SMOLDERING REMAINS OF THE IMPROMPTU TIRE BLOCKADES AND MILES OF BLACK FLAGS LINING BUILDINGS AND POLES THAT THE LIBERATION TIGERS OF TAMIL EELAM (LTTE) REPORTEDLY HAD ERECTED AS PART OF THEIR PROTEST.

TSUNAMI RECONSTRUCTION FACING INCREASING HURDLES

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[1](#)4. (C) POLOFF MET WITH REPRESENTATIVES FROM UNICEF, THE ICRC, THE DUTCH REFUGEE-FOCUSED NGO "ZOA," THE FOUNDATION FOR CO-EXISTENCE, THE GOVERNMENT AGENT'S OFFICE, AND THE TAMIL NATIONAL ALLIANCE (TNA) TO DISCUSS THEIR VIEWS ON THE PACE OF RECONSTRUCTION AND THE PROBLEMS THAT REMAIN. PREDICTABLY, THE GOVERNMENT AGENT--MR. V. SHANMUGAM--WAS THE MOST SANGUINE OF THE INTERLOCUTORS AND DID NOT STRAY FAR FROM THE OFFICIAL GOVERNMENT LINE. SHANMUGAM TOUTED THE GOVERNMENT'S RELIEF EFFORTS AND PLEDGED THAT 3,500 SEMI-PERMANENT HOUSES FOR VICTIMS WOULD BE COMPLETED BY THE END OF THE MONTH AND THAT THE GOVERNMENT WAS PROVIDING 2,500 RUPEE GRANTS TO ALL VICTIMS. HE DOWNPLAYED ANY POTENTIAL PROBLEMS THAT THE PROPOSED 200 METER BUFFER ZONE FROM THE COAST MIGHT PROVOKE AMONG SURVIVORS, STATING THAT LAND WAS EASILY BEING FOUND TO RELOCATE VICTIMS AND THAT ONLY A FEW PEOPLE HAD COMPLAINED TO HIS OFFICE ABOUT BEING FORCED TO MOVE INLAND. WHILE HE REFUSED TO DISCUSS THE POLITICS BEHIND WINNING SUPPORT FOR THE JOINT MECHANISM FOR AID DISTRIBUTION IN THE NORTH AND EAST, HE MAINTAINED THAT THE MECHANISM WOULD DEFINITELY EASE

AND STREAMLINE AID EFFORTS. INTERESTINGLY, MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT FROM THE LTTE-AFFILIATED TNA WERE ALSO RELATIVELY SANGUINE ABOUT TSUNAMI RECONSTRUCTION AND SUPPORTED THE IDEA OF A BUFFER ZONE AND THE JOINT MECHANISM. THEIR COMMENTS ON THE MECHANISM WERE MOSTLY AIMED AT ATTACKING EFFORTS BY THE JANATHA VIMUKTHI PERAMUNA (JVP) TO SABOTAGE THE MECHANISM.

15. (C) THE VARIOUS NGOS WERE MORE CANDID IN THEIR CHARACTERIZATION OF THE RECONSTRUCTION EFFORT, CAVEATING THAT WHAT SEEMED LIKE A PROMISING START TO POST-TSUNAMI AID HAS NOW BECOME BOGGED DOWN IN CONFUSION, MISCOMMUNICATION, AND BUREAUCRATIC BOTTLENECKS. ANDREA JAMES, HEAD OF THE LOCAL UNICEF OFFICE, WARNED THAT CONFUSION AND FRUSTRATION OVER THE BUFFER ZONE PROPOSAL HAS IMPINGED UPON THEIR PROGRAMS. SHE LABELED THE CONSULTATION PROCESS BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT ON ONE SIDE AND THE PEOPLE AND NGOS ON THE OTHER AS "POOR" AND LAMENTED THE GOVERNMENT'S INABILITY TO PROVIDE INFORMATION AND CLARITY ON OFFICIAL POLICIES. PHILLIP GREENE OF ZOA ECHOED THESE COMPLAINTS AND IDENTIFIED BUREAUCRATIC BOTTLENECKS--MAINLY EMANATING FROM COLOMBO RATHER THAN LOCAL OFFICIALS IN HIS VIEW--AND A LACK OF CLARITY AND GOOD COMMUNICATION FROM THE GOVERNMENT AS THE TWO BIGGEST PROBLEMS FACING NGOS IN THEIR AID EFFORTS.

16. (C) BOTH GREENE AND NICOLAS VON ARX OF THE ICRC COMPLAINED THAT THEIR INTERACTION WITH THE LOCAL AGENT HAD BEEN AD HOC AT BEST AND THAT SHANMUGAM SEEMINGLY LOOKED TOWARD THE NGOS FOR ADVICE ON HOW THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD MOVE FORWARD WITH AID. GREENE WENT ON TO STATE THAT THE GOVERNMENT SEEMS TO BE CHANGING THE RULES AND REGULATIONS AND ADDING LAYERS OF BUREAUCRACY WITH EVERY PASSING WEEK. HE CITED ZOA'S EFFORTS TO MOVE TSUNAMI VICTIMS TO TRANSITIONAL HOUSING AWAY FROM THE COAST AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S EVER-CHANGING REGULATIONS. HE CLAIMED THAT SHORTLY AFTER THE TSUNAMI ZOA WAS ABLE TO IDENTIFY A PLOT OF LAND AND RELOCATE

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TSUNAMI VICTIMS QUICKLY AND EFFECTIVELY, BUT SIMILAR

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SUBSEQUENT EFFORTS HAVE BEEN BOGGED DOWN IN GOVERNMENT REDTAPE AND NO ADDITIONAL VICTIMS HAVE BEEN MOVED SINCE THE INITIAL TRANCHE.

17. (C) ALL THE NGO REPRESENTATIVES WARNED THAT THE GROWING FRUSTRATION AMONG INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE (IDPS) FROM THE ETHNIC CONFLICT--MANY OF WHOM HAVE BEEN HOMELESS FOR MORE THAN A DECADE--ABOUT THE SEEMING DISPARITY IN AID BEING PROVIDED TO THEM VERSUS THAT FOR TSUNAMI VICTIMS COULD BECOME A MAJOR PROBLEM FOR BOTH THE AID EFFORT AND THE AREA'S GENERAL SECURITY SITUATION. PHILLIP GREENE MENTIONED THAT TENSIONS WERE ALSO HIGH RIGHT AT THE EDGE OF THE TSUNAMI DAMAGE ZONE, WHERE RESIDENTS WHO WERE RELATIVELY UNAFFECTED BY THE TSUNAMI YET WHOSE ECONOMIC SITUATION HAS BEEN AFFECTED BY THE CIVIL WAR WERE INCREASINGLY JEALOUS OF THEIR NEIGHBORS WITHIN THE TSUNAMI ZONE WHO WERE RECEIVING AID. IN AN EFFORT TO STIFLE SOME OF THIS DISCONTENT, UNICEF AND ICRC REPRESENTATIVES SAID THEY HAVE BEEN REQUESTING THAT SOME OF THE HUGE INFLUX OF MONEY FOR THE TSUNAMI BE SPREAD ACROSS THE NORTH AND EAST TO ADDRESS THE AREA'S MYRIAD OF OTHER HUMANITARIAN PROBLEMS.

18. (C) WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE DEGREE OF THE LTTE'S COOPERATION WITH BOTH THE NGOS AND THE GOVERNMENT, ANDREA JAMES COMMENTED THAT IN HER OPINION BATTICALOA HAS NOT SEEN THE SAME DEGREE OF COOPERATION BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT AND THE TIGERS THAT HAS BEEN SEEN IN LTTE-CONTROLLED AREAS. SHE ADDED THAT IN THE EASTERN REGION THE LTTE IS NOT AS VISIBLE, GIVEN THEIR LACK OF CONTROL. IN THE END, HOWEVER, SHE BELIEVED THAT DESPITE THE REGION'S POLITICAL BAGGAGE, AID WAS FLOWING TO ALL WHO NEEDED IT.

RELIGIOUS NGOS NOT CAUSING PROBLEMS

19. (C) IN LIGHT OF THE RECENT ALLEGATIONS AGAINST THE BEHAVIOR OF RELIGIOUS NGOS INVOLVED IN POST TSUNAMI RECONSTRUCTION, POLOFF ASKED THE NGO REPRESENTATIVES IF THE ISSUE OF RELIGION HAD BECOME A POINT OF FRICTION BETWEEN SOME OF THE MORE RELIGIOUSLY-ORIENTED NGOS AND THE LOCAL POPULATION. ACROSS THE BOARD, THE INTERLOCUTORS STATED THAT THEY HAD HEARD OF FEW SUCH PROBLEMS OR COMPLAINTS. THEY WERE QUICK TO NOTE, HOWEVER, THAT GIVEN THE AREA'S DISTANCE FROM COLOMBO AND ITS REPUTATION AS A VOLATILE AREA, BATTICALOA HAD NOT WITNESSED THE SAME INFLUX OF NGOS AS THE SOUTH AND THAT MOST OF THE MORE RELIGIOUS AND LESS ESTABLISHED NGOS LIKELY OPTED TO OPERATE IN THE SOUTH, THEREBY SAVING BATTICALOA FROM ANY POTENTIAL RELIGIOUS BLOWBACK.

SECURITY SITUATION REMAINS TENSE

110. (C) INTERLOCUTORS GENERALLY DESCRIBED THE TREND IN THE AREA'S SECURITY TO BE NEGATIVE. ELISABETH SETTEMSDAL (PROTECT) OF THE LOCAL SRI LANKAN MONITORING MISSION (SLMM) OFFICE IDENTIFIED TWO NEGATIVE TRENDS IN THE VIOLENCE AND

COMPLAINTS HER OFFICE IS CHARGED WITH INVESTIGATING. FIRST, SHE STATED THAT THE INTERNECINE VIOLENCE IN THE AREA--WHICH SHE QUICKLY NOTED WAS ESCALATING--APPEARS TO BE SPREADING WESTWARD TOWARD THE DISTRICT BORDER WITH POLONNARUWA AND CITED RECENT LTTE ATTACKS ON ALLEGED KARUNA CAMPS NEAR WELIKANDA (REF. B). SECOND, SHE STATED THAT WHATEVER COMITY THAT HAD EXISTED BETWEEN THE SRI LANKAN ARMY (SLA) AND THE LTTE HAD ERODED OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS. SHE HIGHLIGHTED THE FACT THAT, UNLIKE IN THE RECENT PAST, THE SLMM HAS BEEN UNABLE TO MEET JOINTLY WITH BOTH THE LTTE AND THE SLA AND HAS NOW BEEN FORCED TO MEET THEM SEPARATELY. SHE WAS QUICK TO ADD, HOWEVER, THAT COOPERATION WITH BOTH SIDES REMAINS GOOD BUT DID ADMIT THAT THE SLA HAS BEEN MORE "OPEN" AND FORTHCOMING THAN THE LTTE WHEN DEALING WITH THE SLMM. ON THE POSITIVE SIDE, SETTEMSDAL NOTED THAT REPORTS OF CHILD ABDUCTIONS BY THE LTTE HAVE DECLINED IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS. HOWEVER, SETTEMSDAL EXPRESSED SOME WORRY THAT PEOPLE WERE NOT COMING TO THE SLMM WITH COMPLAINTS OF CEASEFIRE VIOLATIONS AS OFTEN AS THEY DID IN PREVIOUS YEARS, EVEN THOUGH VIOLENCE AND TENSION HAD INCREASED IN THAT PERIOD. SHE DID NOT OFFER AN EXPLANATION FOR THE DECREASE IN COMPLAINTS AND INVESTIGATIONS.

11. (C) NGO INTERLOCUTORS, SOME OF WHOM HAVE BEEN IN BATTICALOA FOR SEVERAL YEARS, ALSO EXPRESSED CONCERN THAT THE SECURITY SITUATION WAS DETERIORATING; NONE, HOWEVER, SEEMED TO BELIEVE THAT THE CEASEFIRE WAS IN DANGER OF BREAKING. PHILLIP GREENE ECHOED MANY CITIZENS' COMPLAINTS THAT NEW CHECKPOINTS WERE GOING UP "ALMOST OVER NIGHT," STIRRING UP FEAR AND RESENTMENT IN THE LOCAL POPULATION. HE SAID THAT SINCE HIS ARRIVAL LAST OCTOBER THE LOCAL SECURITY FORCES HAVE EXPANDED THE FORTIFICATIONS AND BARBED WIRE AROUND THEIR CAMPS AND OTHER INSTALLATIONS. EVEN THOUGH SUCH MEASURES WERE PROBABLY WARRANTED IN HIS OPINION, GIVEN THE VOLATILE LAW AND ORDER SITUATION IN THE AREA, GREENE LAMENTED THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECT THE MEASURES WAS HAVING ON THE LOCAL POPULATION, RHETORICALLY ASKING WHAT KIND OF MESSAGE THE GOVERNMENT WAS TRYING TO SEND.

WORRIES, BUT NO EVIDENCE, OF GROWING MUSLIM FUNDAMENTALISM

12. (C) THE GENERAL CONSENSUS AMONG THE INTERLOCUTORS ABOUT THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN THE EAST WAS THAT THERE HAVE BEEN NASCENT SIGNS OF GROWING FUNDAMENTALISM IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY BUT THAT SUCH A TREND HAD YET TO REACH WORRISOME LEVELS. LOCALS REPORT THAT MORE MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE AREA ARE WEARING THE VEIL, AND BURQAS ARE ALSO MORE PREVALENT THAN IN PREVIOUS YEARS. SETTEMSDAL REPORTED THAT LOCAL SECURITY FORCES BELIEVED THAT AT LEAST FOUR SMALL ARMED MILITANT GROUPS WERE OPERATING IN KATTANKUDI, A MUSLIM-DOMINATED AREA SOUTH OF BATTICALOA CITY, BUT BOTH SHE AND OTHER INTERLOCUTORS NOTED THAT THEY DID NOT THINK THAT THIS GREATER RELIGIOSITY HAS TRANSLATED INTO ANTI-AMERICAN OR VIOLENT DISPOSITIONS. IN FACT, SETTEMSDAL REPORTED THAT A LOCAL IMAM WHO WAS CONDONING ANTI-AMERICAN AND VIOLENT TACTICS IN HIS SERMONS LAST YEAR ONLY MANAGED TO BUILD A SMALL FOLLOWING AND WAS LATER ATTACKED BY MORE MODERATE MUSLIMS AND FORCED TO FLEE. V. KAMALADAS OF THE FOUNDATION FOR CO-EXISTENCE, A LOCAL NGO, OPINED THAT FOREIGN BACKING FROM THE GULF AND SAUDI ARABIA WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE NASCENT FUNDAMENTALISM IN THE COMMUNITY. WHILE ALMOST UNANIMOUS IN THEIR BELIEF THAT MUSLIM FUNDAMENTALISM WAS NOT A PROBLEM IN THE EAST FOR NOW, THEY ALL AGREED THAT IT COULD BE A FACTOR IN THE LONG-TERM AND SHOULD THEREFORE BE MONITORED.

DISAFFECTED YOUTH

13. (C) IN A MEETING WITH POLOFF AND INFORMATION OFFICER, SEVEN STUDENTS FROM EASTERN UNIVERSITY EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT THEIR OWN FUTURES AS WELL AS THAT OF THE CITY. THE STUDENTS ADMITTED THAT THE LTTE CLOSELY MONITORS THE UNIVERSITY AND ITS STUDENTS AND THAT MANY STUDENTS HAVE EXPRESSED STRONG AFFILIATION WITH THE ORGANIZATION IN THE PAST. THE STUDENTS DENIED ANY INTERACTION BETWEEN THE STUDENT BODY AND THE KARUNA FACTION. ALTHOUGH THEY ADMITTED THAT THE CEASEFIRE HAD BROUGHT HOPE FOR THE FUTURE AND IMPROVED THEIR ABILITY TO PURSUE A HIGHER EDUCATION, THE STUDENTS REPORTED THAT THE ONGOING LEVELS OF VIOLENCE IN THE REGION AND THE FREQUENT SHUTDOWNS OF THE UNIVERSITY HAD DELAYED THEIR GRADUATION BY AT LEAST A YEAR. AFTER A RELATIVELY IMPROVED PERIOD FOLLOWING THE CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT (CFA), THE STUDENTS WERE FEARFUL THAT THINGS WERE GETTING WORSE AND "GOING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION." THEY CITED THE PLETHORA OF NEW SECURITY CHECKPOINTS AND THE PREVIOUS DAY'S SHOOTING OF A PROTESTOR AS EVIDENCE OF THIS TREND. THERE WAS A CONSENSUS THAT THE GOVERNMENT WAS NOT COMMITTED TO THE PEACE PROCESS AND DOES NOT UNDERSTAND THE FEELINGS OF EASTERNERS. ONE STUDENT NOTED THAT THE PRESIDENT HAD NEVER VISITED BATTICALOA IN THE LAST 10 YEARS. MANY CONFESSED THAT, DESPITE THEIR DESIRE TO STAY IN BATTICALOA TO HELP REBUILD THEIR COMMUNITY, THEY WOULD BE FORCED TO MOVE SOUTH BECAUSE BATTICALOA OFFERED FEW JOB PROSPECTS. THEY OPINED THAT THE AREA'S HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT COUPLED WITH A DEARTH OF TAMIL RIGHTS WOULD LEAD "IDLE MINDS TO SWING TOWARDS MILITANCY."

14. (C) THE STUDENTS BELIEVED THAT THE GOVERNMENT'S LACK OF INTEREST IN TAMIL GRIEVANCES WAS APPARENT IN ITS RESPONSE TO THE TSUNAMI IN THE AREA. ALL THE STUDENTS STATED THAT RECONSTRUCTION WAS MOVING SLOWLY BECAUSE THE GOVERNMENT WAS NOT AS INTERESTED IN THE EAST'S REHABILITATION AS IT IS FOR THE SOUTH, REMARKING THAT "TAMILS THINK WE'RE NOT GETTING WHAT OTHERS GET." THEY DID NOT BELIEVE THAT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD SIGN THE JOINT MECHANISM, EVEN THOUGH THEY THOUGHT IT WAS CRUCIAL TO BOTH THE RECONSTRUCTION EFFORT AND PEACE PROCESS.

COMMENT

15. (C) BATTICALOA TRULY FEELS LIKE A DIFFERENT COUNTRY AND, LIKE JAFFNA IN THE NORTH, IT IS FAR FROM COLOMBO IN TERMS OF CULTURE AND OUTLOOK. THE ONLY REAL VESTIGES OF COLOMBO'S INFLUENCE ARE THE GOVERNMENT AGENT (WHOM THE LTTE SEEMS TO BE ABLE TO QUICKLY INTIMIDATE INTO SUBMISSION), THE EVER-PRESENT ARMED GOVERNMENT SECURITY FORCES, AND THE UBIQUITOUS CHECKPOINTS. THUS, MANY IN THE EAST PERCEIVE "COLOMBO" AS BEING OUT OF TOUCH AND PERFORMING POORLY ON TSUNAMI RECOVERY. THE STRENGTH OF THE HARTAL, THE PREVALENCE OF THE BLACK FLAGS, AND THE PROFESSED FEAR OF THE LTTE AMONG LOCAL STUDENTS SHOW THE PULL THAT THE LTTE RETAINS IN THE AREA. IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT THE MOOD IN THE EAST IS GLUM. WHILE THE CEASEFIRE APPEARS SAFE FOR NOW, THE ESCALATION IN VIOLENCE AND THE LTTE'S REFUSAL TO MEET WITH THE SLA MAKE BATTICALOA PERHAPS THE WEAKEST LINK IN THE ISLAND'S STABILITY.
LUNSTEAD